Ban — and Let Ideas Die

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Banning is never a good idea. And yet there are people around you who will demand, any time something challenges their intellect or belief, that a ban be put in place. Now, Air Vice Marshal AK Khandker, a very reputed freedom fighter, has just come forth with a book that has set people's nerves on edge. One can understand that. But what one does not quite comprehend is why the book must be banned. A good number of individuals have loudly demanded that Khandker's book be proscribed. He has, they say, transgressed the boundaries of historical truth. Perhaps he has, but is banning the answer to the point he has raised?

Of all the voices that have been raised in these past few days about Khandker's infractions, if one might put it this way, only one has demonstrated the decency and civility which come in a refurbishing of intellectual debate. Finance Minister AMA Muhith has done the good thing of telling people that the only way of fighting the contents of a book is through writing another book and clarifying matters. Muhith's words are a sign of wisdom which comes with age. It is wisdom which everyone — and that includes politicians too — must learn from.



Jean-Paul Sartre

But, of course, not everyone can take to books easily. Rajiv Gandhi decreed a ban on Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. That act prompted Ayatollah Khomeini to leap many more miles ahead of the Indian leader. He decided that nothing less than death — and you can be sure of the excruciating pain associated with it — was good enough for the writer. The deed was thus done. All across the Islamic world fanatics took the cue: Muslims rose to denounce Rushdie and accuse him of apostasy. They asked for his head. That was a patent demonstration of intolerance. Where Rushdie should have been engaged in academic debate, there was only heated-up sentimentality that went into work.

DH Lawrence suffered over his path-breaking Lady Chatterley's Lover. Anyone who understands life understands the place of literature in life. In this particular instance, those who went after Lawrence simply failed to grasp the essence of literature. In Stalin-era Soviet Union, a number of writers were in perpetual repression, with their works remaining unpublished or under a cloud. That should not have been the case and the Kremlin ought to have reflected on the thought that someday or the other the world would change and those very writers would be read freely and lovingly. That reminds us of the torment the writer Samaresh Basu was subjected to in India over his eminently readable novel Projapoti. Conservatism was at its height with the censors in India; and Basu suffered immensely. And what do we have now? Simply put, there is hardly anything that we find disturbing about the work.

A ban leads to a cul-de-sac where ideas break instantly into pieces. It is a most opportune way of stopping a debate or preventing one from taking place. In olden-day Pakistan, the Yahya Khan regime